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ABSTRACT

The articles and papers reviewed in this Topical Bibliography and Commentary address the issues of policy statements guiding curriculum people as they select acceptable books for middle school students to read and, specifically, what books should be on acceptable lists. Because of varying perspectives from which the criteria and lists are formulated, however, there is not a simple, comprehensive list of standards and books for educational leaders to use. With a plethora of books available for middle school students, the basic question is "How does a person select quality books for them to read?" The contents of the lists presented in the articles summarized in this bibliography vary in quantity from 20 or 30 listed books to books listing hundreds of reading resources. Some the lists were selected by members of professional organizations, while others were developed by and for use in specific school systems. The papers reviewed in this summary come from diverse backgrounds, but directly or indirectly, all of the documents stress the importance of literary quality in selecting books. (Contains 2 Internet addresses and 15 references.) (NKA)

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Middle School Reading

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Introduction

The articles and papers cited in this document address the issues of policy statements guiding curriculum people as they select acceptable books for students to read and specifically what books should be on acceptable lists. However, because of varying perspectives from which the criteria and lists are formulated, there is not a simple, comprehensive list of standards and books for educational leaders to use. Some of the articles and papers summarized here were written from the perspective of administrators in school systems that have specific concerns not shared by those immersed in the language arts/English curriculum world that developed other criteria and lists. Other materials summarized here represent pure academic research. In spite of the disparate viewpoints of the authors and the dated material in some of the papers, they do share some common themes.

The Basic Question

With the plethora of books available for middle school students, the basic question is "how does one select quality books" for them to read. Sword (1982) in a dated research paper on read-aloud programs cites statistics indicating that teachers feel very strongly about needing help with making quality book selections. Sword found in her 1969 study of middle-school teachers and her 1979 study of kindergarten teachers that 85% of the teachers "relied on their own knowledge in book selection; but in regard to quality of literature chosen, only one-fourth to two-fifths of the books selected for the read-aloud program were categorized as top quality." (10-11) In addition to basing selections on their own knowledge, many of the surveyed teachers selected books provided by the children themselves. (11) Sword points out that this method of selection is not good because, "children are not born with good tastes, but need their tastes to be developed and nurtured." (11) Sword acknowledges that between one-fourth to one-half of the teachers surveyed did use book selection aids to help them choose books. (10)

Book Selection Aids

The contents of the lists presented in the articles summarized here vary in quantity from 20 or 30 listed books to books listing hundreds of possible reading resources. Some of these lists were compiled by teachers for their professional organizations, while others were developed by and for use in specific school systems. So, there might be some repetition in listed resources, but there is certainly no consistency in numbers or types of books listed.

Two of the lists in this summary were selected by members of the Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts Committee of the Children's Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). This committee selects annually the "most outstanding trade books for the enhancement of language awareness among students in grades K-8" (420). A short annotation is offered for each book. The listed books for the 2001 and 2002 articles in this summary met one or more of the following criteria:

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1. deals explicitly with language, such as plays on words, word origins, or the history of the language;
2. demonstrates uniqueness in the use of language or style;
3. invites child response or participation;
4. a) has an appealing format;
   b) is of enduring quality, and
   c) meets generally accepted criteria of quality for the genre in which it is written. (429)

Another resource published periodically by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is *Your Reading: An Annotated Booklist for Middle School and Junior High.* The interesting aspect of this booklist is that it is addressed to students as well as teachers, librarians and others who would find this useful too. The listed books, which number in the hundreds, are primarily from the year previous to the publication of *Your Reading.* Members of the NCTE Committee on the Middle School and Junior High Booklist screen books for "literary merit, curriculum possibility, and age level suitability, while keeping in mind the likes, dislikes, and interests of their students." (13, 1993) The 1993 edition of *Your Reading* emphasizes the importance of carefully selecting books for use in particular cultural settings and encourages teachers to model recreational reading and reading aloud, while the 1995-96 edition is more explicit in emphasizing the "power of words" in books that will make the student "feel, hear, and see." (14, 1995-96)

School System Aids

As noted earlier, some booklists are drawn up as part of the official policy statements by school systems. Examples are given for Iowa, North Carolina, Oklahoma, the state of Washington, and Alberta, Canada. The guidelines for resources used in Alberta become very specific. Acceptable materials should satisfy the following criteria:

- criteria for curriculum fit and instructional design;
- criteria for tolerance and understanding;
- developmental analysis;
- physical properties;
- cost, and
- Canadian content. (vi)

Another Canadian system, Manitoba, produced *Read-Aloud Books: An Annotated Bibliography, Grades 4-8* with over 140 titles. From the title, it is evident that the books in this list were chosen for teachers to read aloud to students. Literary quality was important in the selection process, and teachers were urged to keep local concerns in mind when selecting books for their classes.

In the two bibliographies for grades 3-6 and junior high/middle school in Iowa, the guidelines are the same. The lists were compiled to "stimulate teachers and students to read more widely and to choose quality literature in a period when mediocrity in literature is rampant." (3) The books on the Iowa lists represent universal themes in "drama, poetry, nonfiction, and fiction." (3) Each of these bibliographies has over 500 entries.

Much of the "Guidelines for the Development of Instructional Materials Selection Policies" for the state of Washington is concerned with legal issues about responsibility, bias in materials, etc. for all materials selection, not just trade books for use in classrooms. These guidelines explicitly state that gender, ethnic, and cultural differences should be considered in book selections and that pride in these differences should be evident in the materials. As with other lists of standards, this one says that materials should enrich and support curriculum. But, the standards also include specific skills which should be fostered and, interestingly, suggest that materials should be of "sufficient variety so as to present opposing views of controversial issues in order that young citizens may develop the skills of critical analysis and informed decision making." (12)

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The Zenke paper presented at the NCTE meeting in 1981 presents a summary of the Tulsa, Oklahoma Board of Education book selection policy. The main concerns of this report center around academic freedom, responsibilities of educators, schools, students, and parents, and sensitivity to the "mores of its community in selecting materials for use in the schools." (5) These concerns are responses to adversarial situations between educators and lay citizens in the 1970s.

The materials produced for North Carolina, included in this summary, represent annual advisory lists of suggested books for local schools in the state. There is no hint of the criteria used for selecting the books on the two lists (fiction and fairy tales and folklore).

Research Papers as Aids

James Bradley at the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature at SUNY at Albany compiled a "Selected Bibliography of Materials and Approaches in the Learning and Teaching of Literature" in 1989. This is a bibliography gleaned from a survey of professional publications (derived mainly from the ERIC database) focusing on "curriculum and instruction in the learning and teaching of literature at the elementary and secondary levels." (i)

In a paper presented to the National Reading Conference in 1993, Marie Koals presented results of a study attempting to identify a list of trade books educators used in their classes and to identify factors they used in the selection process. The findings indicate that a book's physical characteristics and its author's "fame" are not as important as appropriate age-level content and a teacher's own review of the materials being considered. This study did not fulfill one of its goals as the research did not yield a concise list of books; rather, the findings suggest "that a wide variety of trade books are being chosen for teaching reading." (5)

Conclusion

The papers collected for this summary come from diverse backgrounds and various chronological periods. In view of the later factor, some of the topics presented in papers are responding to specific issues of the time. But, directly or indirectly, all of the documents stress the importance of literary quality in selecting books. Other criteria vary somewhat depending on who is writing the document.

Sword suggests, in her dated paper, summarizing 20 and 30-year-old research studies some guidelines for book selection which withstand the test of time. Educators should have "personal grounding in the criteria used in evaluating literary works, prose or poetry; an awareness of the best book selection guides currently in print; and a willingness to use the consultative services of a qualified librarian and his/her staff." (10)

Internet Resources

*American Library Association Children's Notable Lists
Each year ALSC identifies the best of the best in children's books, recordings, videos, and computer software. Current and past children's notable lists, and distributors of notable media are also included in this page.
http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ALSC/Awards_and_Scholarships1/Childrens_Notable_Lists/Past_Childrens_Notable_Lists/Default2045.htm

*Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature by State
Compiled and maintained by Cynthia Leitich Smith. Links to children's literature awards by states.
http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/nreadingd.htm#indiana

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Read-aloud books: An annotated bibliography, grades 4-8. (1987). Manitoba Department of Education, Winnipeg Curriculum Development Branch. Winnipeg, Canada. 36 pages. [ED300762]

Samuels, Barbara G. and G. Kylene Beers, eds. (1996). Your reading: An annotated booklist for middle school and junior high, 1995-96. National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL. 386 pages. [ED387826]

Sword, Jeane (1982). The what and how of book selection: Research findings. Presented at the 1st annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference, April 15-17. 18 pages. [ED235506]

Webb, C. Anne, et al (1993). Your reading: A booklist for junior high and middle school. Ninth Edition. National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL. 260 pages. [ED362879]

Zenke, Larry L. (1981). School book selection: Procedures, challenges and responses. Presented at the 71st annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 20-25. 7 pages. [ED213022]

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